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AUTHOR Cibulka, James G.; Derlin, Roberta L.
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ABSTRACT

In recent years, attention to educational reform began to focus on state-level governance and policy. This paper presents findings of a study that examined continuity and change in state-level Performance Reporting (PR) policies in the United States, particularly their relationship to education reform. The paper provides a brief history of pressures for accountability in public education, a review of impediments to the success of performance reporting, and an examination of the overall trends in the data and the most important issues surrounding PR as a policy. Data were obtained from telephone interviews with state education officials from 48 states and a review of state PR documents. The study concludes that PR has become deeply imbedded in state educational policy systems, due to pressures for increasing accountability. However, numerous impediments have prevented PR from becoming an important driver of education reform in many states. Typically, PR has not yet become fully integrated into a system of coherent state education reform policies. The paper concludes with a discussion of PR as: (1) an isolated or interlocking policy tool; (2) external accountability or internal improvement; (3) contextually driven data or prescribed data; (4) a comprehensive or selective performance indicators system; and (5) an equity tool. (Contains 26 references.) (LMI)

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STATE EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE REPORTING POLICIES IN THE U.S: ACCOUNTABILITY'S MANY FACES

JAMES G. CIBULKA
University of Maryland
and
ROBERTA L. DERLIN
New Mexico State University

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine continuity and change in state-level performance reporting (PR) policies in the United States, particularly their relationship to education reform. The authors conclude that PR has become deeply imbedded in state educational policy systems, due to pressures for increasing accountability. However, numerous impediments have prevented PR from being an important driver of education reform in many states. Typically PR has not yet become fully integrated into a system of coherent state education reform policies. The authors call attention to five issues surrounding state PR which require clearer articulation.

Introduction

In the mid-1990s demands for education reform in the United States are accelerating. Since the early-1980's, state policy has been an important locus of attention among reform advocates. Initially reformers expanded state mandates. By the late 1980s policy attention evolved toward reforming local governance, e.g, site-based management or school choice. In recent years, however, attention to governance reform has taken another turn, focusing on *state-level* governance, which increasingly is seen as a constraint on local reform. This paper on PR should be understood in this larger political context. Early PR policies in many states predated more recent state-reform efforts and have since evolved as a component of nearly every state's education policies. Despite this successful institutionalization, PR policy goals remain unclear in many states. How PR fits within the total education policy framework needs to be questioned given recent attention to the need for systemic reform. This paper addresses the evolution of PR as a state policy and its place in education restructuring.

In the United States PR has come to mean systematic reporting of information about public school characteristics and performance. Wide variation can be found in the stated purpose of reporting, the information included, the unit of analysis (state, districts, or schools), comparisons made (against state averages, against peers, against past performance), information distributed, and the uses to which it is put by state and local policy makers.

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Recently PR has emerged at the federal level, e.g., National Education Goals Panel annual reporting.

The most commonly used rationale for having a PR system at the state level is accountability. Accountability is central to PR and will provide the organizing framework for this paper. Accountability involves several loosely connected strands: disclosure concerning the product or service being provided; product or performance testing; and redress for false representation or poor performance (Glass, 1972).

This paper includes a brief history of pressures for accountability in public education, a review of impediments to the success of PR, and finally, an examination of the overall trends in our data and the most important issues surrounding PR as a policy.

Methods

This study employed phone interviews with state-education officials, as well as review of state PR documents. Background information obtained from the Council of Chief State School Officers indicated that the policies and practices for PR varied considerably among the states.[1] As a consequence, attempts were made to include all 50 states in the study. This report is based on data from 48 states. Two states did not return phone calls or respond to inquiries.

Phone interviews focused on the history of PR in that state, how PR has changed over time, sources of controversy, linkages of PR to other state policies, and related questions.

The strategy for analyzing documents and interviews followed Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method as well as Miles and Huberman's (1994) approaches to interpreting and segmenting data.

The analysis focuses on overall national patterns and issues in PR's evolution and does not undertake detailed state-by-state case analyses. This paper considers only state-level developments, since national or local PR would require a separate analysis.

Sources of Accountability Demands

As a social movement, the drive for accountability in public schooling has several origins--political, populist, and professional. Political and populist pressures have come largely from outside the educational institutions. Professional pressures, alternatively, have emerged principally from within the institution, including school administrators, regulatory and accrediting agencies, professors and schools of education, and testing companies.[2]

Pressure for Accountability from Political and Economic Elites

For several decades accountability has been a powerful theme with political elites in government and economic elites who influence government policy. The attempt to apply modern management techniques to government is an example. Such efforts could be traced as far back as the Progressives in the early twentieth century (Callahan, 1962). More recently, President John F. Kennedy launched an effort to make government decision making more rational. A variety of decision tools rooted in input-output analysis were applied. Management by objectives (MBO), the program planning budgeting system (PPBS), program evaluation and review technique (PERT), cost-benefit analysis, operations analysis, systems analysis, and zero-based budgeting are examples of this new technocratic approach.

The accountability impulse is built on the belief that once goals are clearly defined and stated in behavioral terms, they can be measured, and funding can be linked to these results. Advocates argued that technocratic management would produce better outcomes (especially for the educationally disadvantaged) and more cheaply. (Lessinger, 1970; Marland, 1972).

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was the first federal legislation to incorporate specific and far-reaching program evaluation requirements and expectations for results. These legal requirements created a profession of program evaluation experts committed to information-based analysis and reporting.

Many of these managerial reforms found their way into state policies. Wise (1979, p. 12) documented 73 accountability laws enacted between 1963 and 1974. Between 1969 and 1976 Florida adopted a new accountability act annually (Wise, 1979, p.14). By the late 1970s, 30 states had one or another form of statewide assessment (Roeber, 1988, quoted in Koretz, 1992: 1263).

Perhaps the most influential recent tract advocating governance reform is *Reinventing government: How the entrepreneurial spirit is transforming the public sector* by David Osborne and Ted Gaebler (1992). They prescriptions have influenced local, state, and federal government activity. In education, among the reforms they advocate is statewide testing based on performance assessments rather than standardized testing.

Populist Support for Greater Accountability

While the push for greater accountability was pursued largely by political elites or influential economic leaders, the movement was abetted in the 1960s and 1970s by growing popular dissatisfaction with government.

By the late 1960s taxpayer resistance mounted, as the costs of financing the Vietnam War sent ripple effects through the American economy. The idea that government should be more accountable and do more for less became a common theme in the media.

During this period public concern about the quality of American schools also escalated. What had begun in the post-Sputnik years as a concern for math and science preparation spread to concern about standards in nearly every aspect of schooling. This general discontent provided a fertile ground for those who favored specific accountability practices.

This popular dissatisfaction with perceived declining educational standards fostered the basic skills movement in the 1970s. Minimum competency testing for advancement or graduation from high school had been mandated in 33 states by mid-1978 (Wise, 1979, p.2).

Professional Sources of Accountability Policies

The drive for accountability has been as powerful internal to the education profession as externally. There is a long tradition of achievement (and intelligence/aptitude) testing in American education (Travers, 1983). While testing was defended as serving instructional improvement, testing also has had an accountability component (Linn, 1992). Externally-mandated testing, e.g., state basic skills testing programs, fall into this latter category. One of the earliest (1970) and most discussed because of its comprehensiveness was Michigan's (Murphy and Cohen, 1974). State-mandated performance assessments also are becoming more common and have expanded beyond their original use in writing samples (Haertl, 1992). Indeed, many states have begun to shift from traditional paper-and-pencil norm referenced tests to newer forms of performance assessment designed to tap higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills. This drive for measuring student performance has been reinforced by a powerful group of companies who develop and score these tests, and who work closely with university psychometricans.

Many aspects of the accountability movement had their start within professional education circles, e.g. behavioral objectives and competency-based education. In the 1980s, outcome-based education won favor within the profession, advocated by William Spady. Some school districts and states began to develop learner outcomes, sometimes stated as content or process standards, which guided student assessments and frequently carried "high-stakes" for the individual learner, the teacher, or school systems, depending on the specific methodology. These approaches shared certain "rationalistic" assumptions about the teaching-learning process and the educational system. These assumptions included the idea that goals can be reduced to measurable instrumental ends-and-means relationships, that

students and teachers are pliable, that a science of education exists whereby teachers can apply the best methods, that policy can influence or control behavior of teachers and students, etc. (Martin, Overbolt, and Urban, 1976; Wise, 1979).

Currently the most widely accepted reform nostrum with strong accountability overtones is the systemic reform movement (Smith and O'Day, 1991; Fuhrman, 1992). Advocates argue that state policies including goals, curricular frameworks, standards, assessments, teacher pre-service and development, and certification and accreditation should be coordinated. They assert that state (and federal) policies are too fragmented. One theme in systemic reform would involve a simultaneous "loosening" of state policies mandating inputs while "tightening" state oversight of outputs. The concept won partial endorsement in the federal Goals 2000 legislation passed by Congress in 1994, although in 1995 the Republican-controlled Congress sought to weaken the legislation and cut its funding. Nonetheless, the concept of systemic reform remained on the national policy agenda and to varying degrees was being addressed by the states.

Within any profession, there rarely is total consensus on the efficacy of a theory, methodology, practice, or treatment. Not surprisingly, education has had its share of debates about testing, about behavioral objectives, competency-based education, and so on. Each new theory has a honeymoon period, is subjected to increasing criticism on theoretical or empirical grounds, and tends to be replaced by another more recent theory. Theories are not rejected; they merely fall out of fashion. Yet the accountability model which underlies these various reform nostrums has had remarkable staying power. The same rationalistic assumptions built into the accountability model merely are given new labels. Technical rationality, which Max Weber once described as an "iron cage," continues to provide a well-spring for the bureaucratization of the schooling enterprise. The profession and the state have been close, if not unfailing, allies in this quest.

To recap, our argument is that state PR efforts are embedded in a larger institutionalized environment whose driving force has been the further rationalization of the schooling enterprise. Politicians and business stakeholders have pushed such ideas; the public, motivated by concerns of money, quality, and the desire to more directly influence educational institutions believed to be impervious, has been convinced that further rationalization is needed; and finally, professionals themselves have eagerly advanced many reforms whose rationalistic assumptions have served accountability purposes. Given these deep roots in the institutionalized environment, PR is unlikely to disappear as a feature of state education policy.

Yet for all its likely staying power, there is little evidence so far that PR has been an important driver of education reform in many states. State

officials with whom we spoke generally described the performance reporting system as not having generated widespread attention, controversy, or debate because PR is not considered very important by policy makers or the public. In about one-fifth of the states it was reported that PR has proven controversial, because of the manner in which the state reported performance, e.g, use of rankings, or because of the high stakes involved, e.g., identification of low performing schools. Clearly, however, these cases are exceptions. Moreover, in only a handful of states has PR spurred reform of other state policies, such as curricular frameworks. There is an argument to be made that this is a good thing, since PR should perhaps follow prior decisions about curricular frameworks, assessment systems, and so on. At the same time, there is little evidence that in most states PR has been seen as a vital tool for changing the behavior of local school officials. Why is this so?

Impediments to PR and Accountability as State Policy Tools

There are significant impediments to PR becoming a strong state education reform lever. Ironically, these impediments parallel the very features which have been the source of accountability demands. That is, the impediments spring from the political system itself, from populist resistance, and from within the education profession.

Political Impediments

There are significant sources of ideological resistance to the accountability platform, and to a lesser degree to the student assessment systems which are part of accountability processes. Sometimes these appear in the form of partisan struggles, but so far as could be discerned, there is no consistent cleavage dividing Democrats and Republicans. Sometimes Republicans cast themselves as champions of restructuring, battling the educational establishment. At other times they resist high stakes testing as an intrusion on local prerogative. Sometimes Democrats argue for stronger state standards and testing. At other times they ally themselves with teacher unions and/or school board associations who are resisting state authority in the name of local control or professional authority. Hence, a Republican Governor such as Pete Wilson in California, normally an enthusiast for education reform and a critic of the performance of the state's public school system, ordered a halt to the state testing system and was instrumental in cutting off funds for state intervention at low performing schools. In Florida (November, 1994) a Republican Commissioner criticized his Democratic predecessor, promised to reverse previous state performance testing, in the name of returning more control to local school districts. Many examples

could be cited in other states which illustrate that there is no predictable Democratic or Republican position on these reform issues.

Although partisan maneuvering is at work to some degree, it is more useful to view the policy debates on PR and related accountability policies as illustrating *tension among core political values*. While accountability is defended as a policy to improve productivity, at least three other political values compete strongly with this commitment to productivity: equity, economy, and local control.

Pupil equity has been a driving force in many state education policy efforts for many decades dating back to the early 20th century. Beginning in the 1960s, federal laws aimed at educationally disadvantaged and other excluded or underrepresented groups of students spurred state-level equity activity. Equity has strong advocates among professionals who work in programs targeted on these groups. School districts with large proportions of low-income pupils, or pupils of color, raise equity claims, as do low-spending school districts. Consumer and advocacy groups such as the PTA often raise equity concerns. Even teacher unions often wrap themselves in the cloak of pupil equity. Hence, efforts to introduce stronger accountability measures at the state level frequently meet objections from these groups.

One of the most contentious issues is how to report test results. When Pennsylvania officials reported state achievement test results in rank order, they encountered a storm of controversy, particularly from districts who claimed the playing field was not the same if they had many economically, socially disadvantaged, or at-risk children and inadequate resources. Yet reporting the results grouping together districts that have similar socioeconomic (and other) characteristics also is controversial. Many states report that they considered such approaches (which are used in some states such as South Carolina) but ultimately rejected this approach because of criticism that grouping lowers expectations or justifies existing performance differences. California, one of the pioneer states in this "banding," abandoned it and now groups districts in another, ostensibly fairer manner. Some states, fearing improper "simplistic" comparisons, report test results to avoid direct comparisons among schools or districts. For example, in Tennessee the focus is on value-added assessments to encourage internal comparisons over time and comparisons with identified standards to avoid a"superbowl" mentality. Other states de-emphasize external comparison by alphabetical ordering of information or by limiting the amount of information reported.

In some states this attempt to suppress "unfair" comparisons has not succeeded because the media, keenly interested in a good news story, purchase computer tapes and publish the results of their own student test-score analyses. Many states provide some other performance information such as dropout rates and SAT/ACT (college-entrance) scores; background

information such as expenditures, enrollment, and percent of children on free or reduced lunch; and "process" information such as staff characteristics, staffing levels, etc. However, these contextual data are so complex that they do not lend themselves to straightforward interpretation, even in the hands of experts, much less an uninformed parent or a journalist. Hence, whether such reporting leads to unfair comparisons is a major issue in PR across the nation. While it has not stopped PR, it has acted as a brake on the credibility of the effort to provide full disclosure of performance information.

Concern among policy makers for economy can also limit the use of PR in state education policy. It can be an expensive process, subject to criticism by fiscal conservatives and even attacked as wasteful spending by school professionals. While the cost of producing and distributing the reports sometimes is an issue, another concern surfaces over the costs of developing performance-based tests. This has become an issue in Florida, where the Commissioner endorsed returning to a more traditional testing program.

When PR is viewed as too costly, it becomes vulnerable. South Carolina voters elected a Republican governor (November 1994), and the Party's strength in the state legislature increased. For a decade the state had pursued a reform platform known as the Educational Improvement Act (EPA), originally established under the leadership of a Democratic Governor Richard Riley, with bipartisan support. Yet in 1994 education reform was pushed aside by another issue, property tax relief. Continued development of performance-based testing announced by the elected (Democratic) Commissioner of Education were placed in doubt. Key provisions related to PR were slated for sharp cuts or elimination. This case illustrates the principle that a different "problem" like property tax relief can eclipse earlier policy commitments. The reform of K-12 education may be able to dominate policy formation processes long enough to gain adoption, and in the case of South Carolina enjoy a remarkably sustained period of public support with only intermittent attacks, but eventually it must fight to survive as other issues crowd their way onto the policy agenda.

Local control, both as a political value and a political tradition, poses one of the sharpest constraints on the potential use of PR as a state policy. In some states, the tradition of local control is so strong that it has influenced the design of the PR system. Colorado has had an accountability act since 1971, and the process has evolved through several stages, including attempts at comparisons for a short time. However, the tradition of local control has prevented a drift toward a more centralized PR approach. Local school boards have constitutional authority to establish the curriculum. Since assessments are controlled locally, there is no statewide testing system. The state's role is primarily to mandate PR processes at the local level and to gauge overall state performance. The state report card

provides only state-level data.

Michigan is another state where an accountability system was established early, in 1970. Compared to Colorado's approach at that time, the approach was more centralized. The state established a basic skills program with achievement goals, assessments, a PR system, and additional funds for identified educational needs. A strong rhetorical theme in the law was the use of state policies to equalize educational opportunities. Twenty-five years later the state's accountability processes still provide for a strong state role, e.g., the state provides predictor scores for schools. Yet state goals were mitigated during implementation by strong local control. As one state official put it "Rhetorically, accountability is strong...but it gets watered down at the implementation stage. It is the way things are interpreted that's an obstacle. We have a chain fence with many weak links."

Local control also can be a campaign theme which sweeps new political regimes into office. In 1994 Republicans argued that they were elected to return power from Washington to states and localities. In some states PR has come under attack by Commissioners. Idaho's newly elected (Republican) State Superintendent attempted to return all federal "Goals 2000" money to Washington on the premise that the standards-setting requirements of the law amount to an endorsement of outcome-based education. Such positions serve to reinforce strong local control traditions and weaken further policy efforts to create state systemic-reform policies.

If certain key values in our political culture act as constraints on strong and coherent state policies, it is also the case that the fragmented structure of state governance of K-12 education is a factor. For example, some states have elected state superintendents who are formally autonomous from the governor.[3] In recent years there has been friction between these two "branches" of government as governors generally have taken a more aggressive posture on education reform. The possibility that one or both houses of the state legislature is controlled by a different political party adds to the potential for gridlock. Such fragmentation can frustrate the reform efforts of the governor. For example, Wisconsin's Republican Governor Tommy Thompson faced strong opposition to most of his education reform proposals from two successive elected state superintendents who have been Democrats. (The Governor's party captured the second house of the state legislature in 1994, thereby increasing his power to move his proposals into law.) The American system of checks and balances among branches of government, along with divided party control, inevitably slows down reform efforts.

The tradition of regulating schools on the basis of inputs is still another impediment to the development of a strong PR system. Most states have some provision for waivers from state rules, but they are not widely used. Charter schools provide another possible avenue, although the precise

model for a charter school is critical to whether it will be used. Such policies stop short of dismantling the rules and regulations themselves, although a number of states have undertaken efforts to repeal state education codes. Most states, however, are strengthening their efforts to measure (and in some case regulate) on the basis of outputs *at the same time* that they leave mandates, rules, and regulations intact. To the extent that existing rules and regulations remain intact while a new set of accountability policies is imposed on top, systemic reform will be frustrated.

Populist Impediments

Public concerns about rising school costs and declining school quality provided some impetus for PR developments. Elites claimed they were responding to public demands. Yet there has been no popular movement or organized public pressure for PR or systemic reform.

Organized opposition to PR policies has emerged, however. Outcome-based education and student testing have been the targets. While most of this resistance has been from the political right, "mainstream" opposition to testing has emerged from parent groups at the state and local levels, and a number of liberally-oriented national advocacy groups. who question the fairness of testing programs and practices. The varied issues raised by these groups include concerns about too much testing, at too early ages, the inappropriateness of standardized tests, cultural bias and unfair use of tests to judge racial/ethnic and linguistic minorities, and unfair use of tests to compare schools with different student populations and financial/community endowments.

The emergence of resistance on the political right has presented the education reform movement with an unexpected, but very significant backlash. In some states like Pennsylvania, the struggle has been over outcome-based education (OBE). (For a case study of the Pennsylvania experience, see Zahorchak and Boyd, 1995.) Rothman (1995:1-26) chronicles a struggle over OBE and performance assessment in Littleton, Colorado, a suburb of Denver.) Opponents argued that OBE is really about the teaching of "liberal" values, deemphasizes mastery of facts and skills and the traditional curriculum, and harms achievement for more able students by establishing low expectations and impeding attention to their classroom needs. Some extreme-right groups even claim, reminiscent of the John Birch Society's cold-war rhetoric, that OBE is a foreign plot (now Russian rather than Soviet) and a ploy hatched by Washington bureaucrats and elites. The populist overtones of these claims are unmistakable--the tendency to impute conspiracy to their opponents, to see OBE as a product of the machinations of elites (against "us" the people), and the framing of the issue as a messianic struggle to preserve an entire culture against its enemies. That

such populist rhetoric is sometimes well financed and very well organized by a national network of politically-conservative groups only serves to strengthen its political influence.

Resistance to testing programs focusing on measuring outcomes either has been waged as part of the OBE debate, as in the Littleton, Colorado case, or it has followed closely upon it. California abandoned its performance-based testing efforts after the political right mobilized around some of these issues.

Politically conservative groups have not been able to stop OBE and testing programs altogether. In Minnesota, for example, the efforts to develop outcome-based graduation standards, the "Minnesota Profile of Learning" for each district's self-assessment have continued. Nonetheless, nationally such groups have complicated the political settlement surrounding systemic reform issues. Their greatest success may well be to have transformed OBE, performance-testing, and more broadly, systemic reform from a technical-rational frame to a political one. By broadening the political debate and widening the arena of relevant actors, they may alter the political settlements.

Professional Impediments

As long as PR and systemic reform are seen as technically-rational reforms, professional educators will have a great deal to say about their adoption and implementation. However, professionals' ownership of this issue does not assure a coherent policy supporting PR and systemic reform. First, there is not unanimity within the profession on whether further standard setting and testing are desirable, e.g., there is considerable debate about the appropriateness and efficacy of "high-stakes" testing. Ethical issues surround tests, e.g., some argue that any type of coaching students even indirect, constitutes unethical behavior, while others see nothing wrong with "teaching to the test" if exact items are not covered.[4] Others allege that tests narrow what is taught to what is capable of being measured. Some critics charge that tests continue to sort students according to socioeconomic and racial status, and that improper inferences about student aptitudes are made by policy makers, teachers and other school officials from tests that only measure achievement (Koretz, 1992). Others argue that tests are irrelevant because few teachers actually rely on large-scale tests to diagnose student needs and improve instruction; instead teachers rely on their own assessments. Some teachers question the lost instructional time for students. There are answers to each of these assertions. Indeed, the point is that despite the large amount of testing which occurs in American schools, there is remarkably little consensus within the profession on its appropriate role and most efficacious use.

Recent enthusiasm for "authentic assessment" has presented its own set of technical difficulties. It has yet to be resolved how performance assessments can be administered on a large scale with appropriate psychometric standards of validity and reliability. Difficulties in the mechanics underlying performance-based testing results such as aggregation and costly strategies for staff development and training to achieve comparability also constrain the development of alternative assessments.

Policies and practices are proceeding without these technical issues being adequately resolved. It has led to major problems in some cases, e.g., Arizona suspended performance assessments when audits revealed that the tests were measuring too narrow a band of skills.

Furthermore, in many states technical problems abound on how to structure PR so that it is coordinated with other state policies. Perhaps a key point of disagreement within the profession is whether a centralized model of state systemic reform is desirable. Clune (1993) argues that it is not, making a case for a more decentralized, differentiated approach, which seems to comport with the wide variety of approaches being undertaken in states attempting to redesign their state education policy systems. Within this variety great differences will be found in the approach to performance reporting. Minnesota at one extreme represents a highly decentralized process; the state only mandates that local officials will develop local PR tied to state graduation standards. Kentucky at the other extreme has a highly centralized set of interlocking policies, tying the PR system into rewards for teachers and schools and sanctions for poorly performing schools. Which approach is better? There is not a clear answer to this question, given the great differences in political traditions between states like Minnesota and Kentucky. Further, given the traditionally higher performance of Minnesota on external performance measures like college entrance exams, it can argue that its approach is adequate, while Kentucky's more serious problems may warrant the dramatic remediation it has undertaken.

Conclusion

The information obtained from the states in this study suggests that, while accountability concepts have become imbedded educational policy systems, PR has not been integrated into the coherent and well-integrated educational policy system that Smith and O'Day (1991) suggest is needed to achieve school improvement. Most commonly, states reported that improved access to accountability information occurs simultaneously, but independently from, other policies designed to influence improvements in the educational delivery system.

In this paper we have suggested why PR has played such an ambiguous role in state education policy reform. The political context within

which PR occurs has been characterized by countervailing "push and pull" pressures from government and economic elites, from populist sources, and from professionals. Within each of the three arenas, some political forces have encouraged a stronger role for PR, while others have restrained its potential impact.

Despite the difficulties encountered in achieving a more coherent approach to PR in state education policies, some positive trends emerge. Accountability reporting information is being related more closely to existing educational policies, and consequences for school performance are increasingly considered as a means to facilitate school improvement. Public provision of information continues to facilitate the involvement of external stakeholders in efforts to improve schools. Business communities, political leaders, and the media continue to use accountability information to bolster arguments for further reforms. From the business community, realtors provide a continuing, although usually unintended, additional means of distributing public information about the schools. The impact of this expanded access to information about school performance contributes to continuing pressure to improve the public schools in local communities. In addition, the interaction among realtors on regional and national levels generates pressure in states that do not have comprehensive systems. While the flurry of controversy about accountability reporting resulting from the initial media coverage of the reports has subsided, continuing media coverage also helps to focus public attention on issues of school improvement.

Although it is not certain whether PR will evolve into an important vehicle for reshaping state policy, two things can be said with relative certainty. First, PR will survive as an instrument of state policy if for no other reason than it is one of the most potent *symbols* state policy makers can develop to reassure a skeptical public that policy makers are trying hard to improve the quality of public education. (For discussions of the symbolic quality of politics see Edelman, 1967 and Wilson, 1989.) It allows politicians and bureaucrats to wax eloquently when improvement is found and attribute it to their own policies. Even when problems are found, policies can be designed to reassure the public that the problems will be fixed. And, of course, the documentation of such problems provides those in the minority party and aspirants to elected office with cannon fodder with which to blast their opponents as custodians of the status-quo. Indeed, as political symbolism, PR is more effective than many other policy tools because it relies on periodic disclosure, which is itself a political resource: the ability to capture and focus public attention, if only briefly.

PR will also survive for another reason. The tradition of testing in American schools is deeply institutionalized. Insofar as PR is inextricably linked to testing as the medium to measure and report system performance,

it will survive at the very least as an extant element of the state policy system.

However, PR has yet to receive the systematic attention it deserves if it is to assume more than a symbolic role in education policy. Accordingly, we call attention to the following issues concerning PR which require clearer articulation:

PR as an Isolated or Interlocking Policy Tool

Should PR be a stand-alone feature of state policy or should it be coordinated with other policy elements? Insofar as the goal of PR is merely to disclose information to the public, it can certainly stand alone. However, to the degree that it is viewed as an instrumental tool to directly accomplish other state goals, e.g., spurring curriculum reform, rewarding improved performance, it needs to be carefully linked to other state policies. An isolated PR system might be viewed as "low-stakes;" an interlocking system is more likely to become "high stakes."

Our findings show that there is a growing trend, albeit slow, to link PR to consequences for school performance, e.g., financial rewards, deregulation strategies, or sanctions. Accountability reporting information is more frequently being seen as a diagnostic tool to trigger intervention and school improvement strategies. These efforts to link PR to other state policies appear to be one promising element in achieving greater coherence in the policy system.

States are in widely different stages with respect to implementation of these approaches. For example, in some states such as South Carolina these provisions have been in place for a long time. In New York, the policy system includes provisions for schools to receive technical assistance, staff development support, as well as support for self-improvement studies. Wisconsin, by contrast, has just recently developed plans to provide intervention and assistance to low-performing schools.

Relating PR information to existing policies in the system like accreditation reviews, the development of required school planning documents and self-improvement analysis, suggests greater integration of the educational policy system as a whole is emerging, although again, developments vary considerably from state to state.

North Carolina announced a decentralization plan in 1995 which, if implemented, would illustrate how PR can be integrated into a coordinated, interlocking educational policy system. That plan by the state board of education called for dramatic cuts in staffing of the state department of public instruction, rewriting state education laws to give local school districts maximum flexibility, setting annual performance standards for each school in the state, awarding bonus state aid to schools for meeting those

student performance goals, and intervention for low performing schools. In such a scheme, PR also would facilitate other features of the new educational policy system.

PR as External Accountability or Internal Improvement

PR may be viewed merely as a device for providing feedback from the outside or as a tool for internally-generated improvement. An indicator system can be solely an external form of accountability, or it can serve both internal and external processes. Merely publishing a state report falls into the category of external accountability, while requiring the use of the information for school improvement takes the information and makes it part of the internal operations of a school system. Whether the latter strategy works effectively to create incentives for local decision makers to utilize the data in more than a ritualistic, compliance posture would require systematic study.

PR as Contextually-driven Data or Prescribed Data

There are a cluster of considerations here. How much do local decision makers "own" the data contained in PR? Some states allow local add-ons to reports for local officials to comment on mandated data or to provide additional data. Second, for the most part the data are not on-line for local officials to use in generating their own analyses. If states move in this direction, they will increase the likelihood that indicator systems will become part of the on-going planning and decision processes of school systems. Third, whether state reporting should try to capture local context in the reporting process remains a matter of some debate in need of further conceptual development. As we explained, most states try to capture some context by reporting features of local school systems or schools, such as their size, resource levels, staffing, and the nature of their student body. If these are merely lists, it can be argued that they still "decontextualize" the interpretation of the "real" data because contextual data are not directly related to the outcomes and can be ignored. As indicated earlier, a few states use banding or clustering techniques to group similar districts and schools. How to report the data in a manner to provide meaningful comparisons of context, whether for external accountability or internal improvement, is an evolving issue.

PR as a Comprehensive or Selective Performance Indicator System

Related to the issue of context is how to capture more indicators of quality than test scores and other morphological features of the educational

system such as size and pupil-teacher ratios. Should features such as school climate be measured, and if so, can stable measures of it be reported over time for any meaningful policy purpose? Should parent survey information be developed and measures of parent and community engagement with the school? As the few states that have begun to move in this direction have discovered, such data collection can be burdensome and expensive and therefore quickly labeled as a state imposition on local prerogatives. Yet a more variegated data base which captures all manner of information on organizational processes and culture, as well as community context, comes closer to the models of organizational behavior we now use in organizational development. Organizational learning is unlikely to occur without such information, but whether to leave adaptation of performance information to local officials is an unresolved question. It does seem that PR is evolving within some states toward systemic reform principles which incorporate more contemporary knowledge about how organizations change. Yet how PR itself should be constructed to comport with principles of organizational behavior other than a simplistic input-output model has been subject to little such deliberation. Here again, the tendency for accountability to be an overriding raison d'etre may be a very large stumbling block to such a reconceptualization.

PR as an Equity Tool

While most of the thrust for strengthening PR has centered on concerns about improving school productivity, an important challenge for the design of PR systems is to assure that they also are equitable. The stakes attached to PR systems, the kinds of assessments used, the way information is reported and compared, and similar design features all have implications for pupil equity. There does not appear to be one right way to resolve these perplexing issues. Indeed, the goal of productivity may clash sometimes with efforts to protect pupil equity. However, if such considerations are an explicit part of the decision making process when PR systems are designed and refined, it is more likely that a balance can be found among these competing values.

These five issues surrounding PR need much more careful debate, particularly if PR is to play an important role in state education reforms. While nearly everyone can agree that accountability is a good thing, in practice it has many faces. The variety of problems surrounding PR policies illustrate both technical and political challenges. PR is unlikely to go away. The real question is whether it can be transformed into a potent, effective policy reform lever. In the United States that developmental process has only barely begun.

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Biographies

James G. Cibulka is Professor and Chair, Department of Education Policy, Planning, and Administration at the University of Maryland. He received his Bachelor of Science degree *magna cum laude* from Harvard College, with a major in Government. His Ph.D. is from the University of Chicago, Department of Education. He has published on the politics of education, education finance, education policy, urban education, and private schools.

Roberta L. Derlin is Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Management and Development at New Mexico State University. She received her Masters of Business Administration degree from Cornell University and her Ph.D. in Urban Education from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Her research interests include education policy, education finance and existing and emerging education research methodology.

Notes

1. The assistance of Rolf Blank at the Council of Chief State School Officers in providing valuable background information is acknowledged gratefully.

2. Institution is used broadly here to include the network of actors who are not only part of the formal organization of schools but who also are part of their immediate environment which contributes to the legitimization of the institution. For a more complete treatment of this argument see Cibulka (in press).

3. Even in states with appointed educational executive officers, a change in elected officials regardless of political affiliation contributes more readily to incoherence in the policy system.

4. For discussions on the pros and cons concerning these claims, see Haladyna, T. M., Nolen, S. B. and Haas, N. S. (1991); Mehrens, W. A. & Kaminski, J. (1989); and Popham (1991).